

THE NATIONS OF RUSSIA

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Irrespective of where we may stand in the present war, we all hope that in post-war Europe peace will be more stable than in the past. But, in order to gain stability, any future organization of Europe will have to take two factors into consideration: on the one hand, the necessity for a large-scale economic co-operation which will have to reach beyond national frontiers; on the other, the powerful urge of the awakened peoples to live with their fellow nationals as free men in nations of their own. To find a solution that would do justice to both these objectives will be a task that no one will expect to be easily accomplished. Nationalism in particular is deeply ingrained in the nature of man.

Most of the outstanding political issues of today are fairly well-known throughout the world. But of the national minority problems, which were particularly responsible for the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 and again of the present war (Sarajevo, Danzig), most people have only a very hazy notion. Not many, for example, realize that almost half the population of the Soviet Union (47.2% according to the census of 1926) consists of people who are not or do not consider themselves Russians in the proper sense of the word, and that 88 different nationalities of at least 10,000 members each are living within the USSR, not counting many smaller groups which bring the total number to about 150. (Of these the Ukrainians and the Turks are by far the largest.) As a result many more nationalities are living and many more languages are spoken in Russia alone than in the whole of Europe. Russia is the world's nationality problem number one, even though few people outside know this on

account of the silence which the Soviet Government imposes upon its national minorities.

VOYAGE TO BASHKIRIA

After studying during a number of years the theoretical angle of the Bolshevik nationalities policy I decided a few years ago to spend a month amongst one national minority of Russia. I tried to find one that would be neither too big nor too small, neither too backward nor too advanced, neither too far from Moscow nor too close—in other words one that could be considered as typical of the rest. I chose Bashkiria.

I even attempted to learn the language before I went on my expedition and found a young Bashkir journalist in Moscow who was willing to teach it to me. I did not tell him right away that I was a foreign correspondent. The inhabitants of the USSR have learned to avoid contacts with foreigners as much as possible, since these have often led to accusations of espionage, and I did not want to scare him away. After the first three lessons, however, I casually mentioned that I was not a Soviet citizen. I must say for him that he managed to sit through that hour, but after that I never saw him again.

The "Bashrespublika," as the Bolsheviks call the Bashkirian Republic in their fancy for abbreviations, is inhabited by a branch of the Turk peoples of which there are some twenty to thirty millions in the USSR. They live in the mountains and foothills of the Urals. On comfortable and leisurely steamers I went down the Volga and up the Kama and Belaya rivers to the

heart of Bashkiria. To travel on Russian boats is always restful. They move slowly through the endless countryside. Although there was nothing exciting to be seen, my eyes enjoyed the forests red with autumn and the golden wheat fields on both banks. There were only a few villages and stops on the way. While the sailors loaded or unloaded a little cargo, we passengers ran ashore to buy a boiled chicken, a pound of butter (with fingerprints), or a basket of apples from the Bashkir women who were sitting in dignified silence behind their wares. Here and there I stayed for a day or two, visiting a collectivized village (*kolkhoz*), chatting with the peasants, and sleeping in their huts.

In Ufa, the capital, the Bashkir Government invited me to participate in the maiden run of a train over the newly completed ninety mile railroad to Ishembayevo, where new oil fields were being developed. I went along. Part of the way I preferred to walk. In order to complete the construction program on time the train had to cross gulleys, not on bridges—which were not yet built—but on rails supported by piles of wooden ties. The roadbed was so hastily built that in places the rails looked like snakes. But we reached our destination—slowly and with much speech-making at every station. The train returned to Ufa with ten tank-cars filled with the first oil from the new fields; and I returned with the experience of having seen Bashkirian peasants in the process of transformation into railroad and oil field laborers.

"DE-NOMADIZING" THE KAZAKS

Feeling that one month in one of the national republics had not been enough, in the following year I spent another few weeks with another branch of the Turkic nation in the Kazak Republic of Soviet Central Asia. While Bashkiria was until recently a country of peasants who are now being changed into collective farmers and industrial laborers, the Kazaks (not to be confused with the Cossacks) since time immemorial have

been herdsmen and nomads and are now being forced into settled life and factory work through the process of "de-nomadization." In Kazakhstan I had to adapt my mode of traveling to the enormous size of the country, which equals the combined territories of Germany, England, France, Spain, Italy, and Turkey. I flew the whole way, with stops in nomadic, industrial, and agricultural regions.

The Bolsheviks feel very proud and progressive when they claim in their publications that practically all the ten million nomads living in Russia at the time of the Revolution have been torn away from their former habits and are now settled. To the Marxists a nomad is an unfortunate being who must be saved, even against his will, from his economic backwardness. However, I have often wondered whether it is really progress to transform into forced settlers the free and wandering Kazak nomads whose mode of life is the result of thousands of years of adjustment to their natural environment.

The Bolsheviks were honest enough to admit at least part of the price which the Kazaks and the whole of the Soviet Union had to pay for this de-nomadization. According to the official Soviet figures the total livestock of Kazakhstan, formerly the livestock country of the USSR, sank from 24 million head in 1930 to 2.4 million in 1933. (From *Kazakhstan k IX Syezdu Sovietov*, Alma Ata, 1935, p. 87.) Obviously the Kazaks after losing 90% of their livestock had no other way out than either to starve to death or to follow the Soviet demand to become settlers and industrial workers. But while the Soviet Government admitted that its policy of de-nomadization in Kazakhstan alone has cost 21½ million head of livestock, the loss in human lives was never announced. Judging from conversations I had on the way, and from the many abandoned habitations I saw from the plane, my guess would be that 20 to 30% of the Kazaks paid with death for this tremendous upheaval in their lives.

The following pages are a result of my expeditions into Bashkiria and Kazakhstan, of observations in a number of other national minorities such as Karelia, the Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaidjan, and Armenia, and of a study of the theoretical foundations of the Bolshevik nationalities policy.

STALIN'S THEORY

Twenty-nine years ago, in the winter months of 1912, a man was writing his first large theoretical study. Known to the small group of his political friends as well as to the police under many different names, and to history as Stalin, he composed the standard work *Marxism and the National Question*, and thus became among the Bolsheviks a specialist in this field. Five years later, in November, 1917, Stalin was the first People's Commissar for Nationality Questions and hence a member of the Soviet Government. At a time when his name was still unknown abroad and only rarely heard in Russia, he played a considerable role in the relations between the Soviet Government and its national minorities.

The most concise formulation of his nationality theory was given by Stalin at the Sixteenth Communist Party Congress in the summer of 1930. Stalin declared the melting of national cultures into a single culture, with a single language, to be the final aim of the Bolsheviks. This aim, he explained, could only be reached after the victory of the world revolution. As long as the dictatorship of the proletariat was confined to one country, the Soviet Union, the individual nationalities were to be allowed to possess and to develop their national cultures.

The calculation which led to this decision was simple: in order to win the much needed support of the minorities in the struggle against the Tsarist regime, the Bolsheviks had had to give them something that would bind them to the cause of the Revolution. Nothing could accomplish this better than the granting of those

rights which the various nationalities had always craved and rarely obtained under the Tsars: free speech, press, and education in their own languages. The granting of these rights by the Bolsheviks actually had much to do with the eventual victory of the Bolsheviks in the whole of Russia. The national minorities felt that the Bolshevik victory would be to their advantage.

Soon, however, the minorities found that things were not quite as simple as they had appeared. In his theory Stalin divided culture into form and content, and he created the famous formula that in the Soviet Union the cultures of all nationalities should be national in form, socialistic in content. That in itself did not sound bad; but what did it mean? It meant that the form of cultural life—language, alphabet, etc.—could be Bashkir, Kazak, or Ukrainian, but the content had to be—Moscow. In other words, the nationalities were permitted—for the time being in their own languages, with their own alphabets, in their own newspapers, movies, or radios—to praise the ideas of Bolshevism and nothing else.

NATIONAL FORM

Up to the middle thirties Stalin's formula was on the whole adhered to. The nationalities actually were granted the national form of their cultures. Schools, newspapers, printing houses grew like mushrooms, all of them becoming so many channels through which Bolshevik ideas were pumped into the minds of the people. The Bolsheviks even went further than the nationalities themselves intended them to go. They created new written languages where they had not before existed, in order to split up the non-Russian population into small and harmless groups.

In particular was this done in the case of the Turks, the largest non-Slavic nation within the USSR. The Bashkirs had never had a written language of their own, their spoken language being only a Tartar dialect.

To prevent too much co-operation between these racially closely related groups, the Bolsheviks insisted on giving the Bashkirs a written language and grammar of their own. Thus we have the curious phenomenon that with regard to the other Slavic peoples (Ukrainians and White Russians) the Bolsheviks always minimize the differences in language and historical tradition, claiming them to be Russians like themselves, while in the case of non-Slavic nationalities they emphasize to the utmost the already existing differences between them.

SOCIALISTIC CONTENT

There is no question in my mind that the granting of the national form has won the Bolsheviks many friends among their numerous national minorities. These were now allowed freely to enjoy what the former Government had either prohibited or limited. For many of them this was all they were interested in. Those, however, who tried to look at the root of things soon found that there had been much more lost through the "socialistic content" than had been won through the national form, and that the tremendous power of the socialistic content gradually made that national form meaningless.

The socialistic content expressed itself primarily in three ways.

COLLECTIVIZATION AND DE-NOMADIZATION

The first concerned the mode of life of the agrarian population: collectivization of the peasants and de-nomadization of the nomads. The collectivization, which turned individual peasants into laborers on large collective or state farms, was enforced in the whole of Russia in the years 1929-32 in almost exactly the same way. The influence of this entirely new economic development was so tremendous that, in comparison with it, the formerly existing differences between, say, Russian and Bashkirian peasants paled into insignificance.

In Bashkiria 4,000 collectives, or *kolkhozes*, took the place of 400,000 individual peasant farms. Daily life on a collective farm is radically different from that in an individual peasant home. Where formerly a hundred peasants had performed more or less similar tasks, there was now a wide differentiation. In a *kolkhoz* one needed bookkeepers, mechanics, managers, chauffeurs, and many other specialists whom neither the Russian nor the Bashkirian villages had known before. The collectivization also brought countless Russian, Bolshevik, or international words such as *kolkhoz*, *traktor*, *combine*, *Marxistic*, etc. into the language of peasants throughout the USSR. Sometimes, while listening to Bashkirian *kolkhozniks*, I was able to follow their conversation. Not, I hasten to add, because of my three lessons in Bashkir, but because their conversation was permeated with the same words I had so often heard in Russian *kolkhozes* or read in Russian newspapers.

INDUSTRIALIZATION

The second way in which the Bolshevik content overwhelmed the minorities was through industrialization by the Five Year Plans. In Bashkiria, for instance, the figures of Bashkir industrial laborers increased by 600% in the first Five Year Plan alone. If one observes Bashkir peasants or Kazak nomads suddenly transformed into industrial workers one can easily imagine the tremendous revolution which this means in their lives. The more simple-minded and backward a person is, the more will he be overcome by this change in his work and way of life.

Compared with conservative agriculture, modern industry is a very powerful melting-pot. The ex-nomads and ex-peasants must, in order to succeed, speak Russian well to converse with their Russian superiors — the foremen and engineers in their plant — and it will not be long before you hear Bashkir laborers speaking Russian even among themselves, at least when their conversation concerns their work.

BOLSHEVIZATION

The third great influence of the socialistic content is the Bolshevization of all cultural life. Take Bashkiria, for example: I have met practically all Bashkir writers of note, have read all their works as far as they have been translated into Russian, and have had lengthy talks with them about their writing. What I found was not a Bashkir literature, but a Bolshevik-Russian literature accidentally clothed in Bashkir language. The subjects treated were with rare exceptions the same as those in the rest of the Soviet Union: class struggle, glorification of the Revolution and of communist ideology, collectivization, industrialization. (Only in one literary field was there a national note to be found, in that of historical novels and plays. I shall return to this later). The same is also true of the schools. The only thing I found to be Bashkirian was the language: everything else—subjects, methods of study, type of textbooks, presentation of the subject matter—was dictated from Moscow.

The extraordinary power of Bolshevization becomes particularly evident when one observes that even Islam, once a powerful factor in the life of the Turk people and a strong bond uniting them, is receding in importance. I gained the impression that with few exceptions Islam has lost contact, at least for the time being, with the realities surrounding its erstwhile followers. Accustomed to dealing with illiterate peasants and nomads, it was swept off its feet by the rapid transformation of its people and now has little influence on the younger generation. It is, of course, quite possible that the young Turks of Russia will eventually realize the emptiness of life without some religious content; but they will, I believe, return to Islam only if it succeeds in readjusting itself.

DANGEROUS HISTORY

It is not enough to mention these obvious consequences of the application of Stalin's nationality theory on the

peoples of Russia. There are also some more subtle results. The permission to use and develop the forms of their culture gave the consciously nationalistic elements among the minorities a welcome weapon in their struggle for the preservation of their national individuality. They had to proceed with utmost caution and one should not overestimate their success. Nevertheless they were to some extent able to use the national form for the propagation of a national content. This was particularly the case in their emphasis on national history. The Bashkirs, for example, rapidly changing from a nation of illiterates to one where the majority could read and write, were now able, for the first time, to read for themselves of the heroic deeds of their ancestors in the many books about Bashkir history which began to appear.

As far as the nationalists were concerned, it was all to the good that almost the entire history of the Bashkirs is one long fight with Russian imperialism. Thus in the guise of history they could awaken and strengthen the pride of their countrymen in their age-old heroic struggle against Russian domination. Listen, for instance, to the song of Salavat Yulayev, the greatest hero in Bashkir history, whose life—at the time of Catherine the Great—was an endless struggle against the Russians. I found the song in a biographical novel of the hero, published in 1933. In it Salavat Yulayev sings of his love for the Bashkirian land and for Yurusen, his native river.

THE SONG OF SALAVAT YULAYEV

O Yurusen, river of my home,
Your banks are covered with reeds,
Those of other rivers have only
stones.

O lovely river, swift as an arrow.
Came the Russian with his shovel,
Many Russians with their guns.
They built factories,
Factories on your beautiful banks,
Spreading filth and feeding pigs.
Let them tear apart my nostrils,

middle thirties they began to suspect that the neat division of culture into form and content was too simple to succeed with such complicated creatures as human beings. Form and content, they discovered, are very closely related. Just as the body and soul of a man cannot be separated at will, so the content and form of a nation's life are one. In theory and for purposes of discussion their separate existence is, of course, possible, but in real life they are only two sides of the same thing. It is not irrelevant which language we speak, what melodies we sing, which historical heroes we worship. Every language, music, or history has its own spirit which helps to mould the mind of its people.

During the last few years little more was said in Russia about Stalin's famous division. Instead, the tendency turned noticeably against national form. Emphasis on the Russian language was greatly increased, and the use of national tongues discouraged with the assertion that they were backward and tended to retard the growth of socialism. "Why should we," wrote for example the Soviet writer Gladkov, "renew the past and galvanize the dusty Ukrainian language? That would only hinder the development of socialist progress." National alphabets were abolished and replaced by the compulsory introduction of Russian letters; words and phrases that had long been taboo, such as "Little Mother Russia" and "Russian Fatherland," reappeared. Everything that could be interpreted as furthering the national spirit of minorities was sought out and "liquidated." Even the literature of post-Revolution years was denounced and the national minorities lost a number of prominent writers in the purges of the late thirties.

THE CASE OF VASSA'S PRETTY LEGS

A curious example of the exaggerated but perhaps not unjustified Bolshevik suspicion against everything national was the case of the book

First Spring by the Ukrainian author Gregory Epik. In one scene of the novel, the writer describes the thoughts of Comrade Golubenko, a Ukrainian Bolshevik Party Secretary, as he thinks of Vassa, a lovely Ukrainian girl, or rather of her pretty legs. These are his thoughts: "Vassa's legs to him appeared neither thin nor thick. Their elastic rotundity softly fell near the sculptured knees, evenly continuing lower and enlarging again, well-proportioned, to beautiful calves, and ended thinly as if in a chiseled bone. Because of legs like these the Ukraine more than once suffered attacks from Tartars and Turks and because of such eyes and such a soft deep voice as that of Vassa the Ukraine was justly proud of her daughters."

To S. Shtchupak, a Bolshevik literary critic, this sounded like counter-revolution. In his work *The Struggle for Methodology* (p.142-143) he wrote: "The nationalistic enthusiasm for the 'Wonderful Ukrainian Woman,' this theory of national biology, is in reality a racial theory, a clear case of nationalism." Eventually the author Epik was exiled to the Far North and then shot.

We may smile at the zealous Bolshevik critic, yet, in a way, he was right: form and content cannot be separated. The affectionate enthusiasm for Ukrainian legs which a Ukrainian author puts in Ukrainian words into the minds of a Ukrainian Bolshevik is, all other means being closed, one possibility of making Ukrainian readers think along Ukrainian lines.

The present war emergency is strengthening the emphasis on everything Russian; it is heightening suspicion towards the national minorities and increasing their oppression. The original promise to leave the forms of their culture to the various nationalities, until they can be replaced by a rising international culture after the victory of the world revolution, seems to have been forgotten. Perhaps the Bolsheviks have found that there can be no international culture, that there must be a national culture or none at

all. At any rate the new tendency to enforce Russian culture rather than an international culture on the minorities is unmistakable. If the present development is to continue, Stalin's slogan will soon have to read: the culture of the national minorities is to be Russian in form and Bolshevik in content.

THE ISSUE

The replacement of national culture by a uniform world culture, as it is frankly advocated by the Bolsheviks, seems to many a desirable and logical evolution. These are frequently the same people who, when speaking of world culture, naively assume that this means the adoption of their own civilization and way of life by the rest of the world. Their internationalism is often at bottom nothing but a super-nationalism, based on the belief that they, of course, are on the right track and that the salvation of the world rests with everybody's becoming like themselves.

There is also another way of looking at nations. It is less simple but also less superficial, and seems more convincing to the student of history and

political realities: to regard nations as the organic outgrowth of thousands of years of history and their variety as a source of great enrichment for the world. This attitude comes naturally to persons like myself who have enjoyed living in many different parts of the world, because they have found, growing on the common soil of human nature, a miraculous wealth of nations, cultures, ideas, forms of art, literatures, religions. Hawaii is perhaps the finest example of the values created by the preservation of the national culture of many different peoples living together.

Those who share this attitude know that for countless ages a narrow, misunderstood, and misinterpreted nationalism has been breeding hatred, suspicion, and wars. They see no way out in either the imperialistic enforcement of one way of life on the rest of the world or in the fratricidal antagonism between various nationalisms. They look toward a solution in which each nation accepts and respects the peculiarities of the other (without denomadizing the nomads or proletizing the peasants), and where all by common agreement and under the intelligent guidance of leading nations work for the same purpose—a better future.